

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 21, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy,

We were alarmed to learn that the City of Milwaukee's Health Department's request to receive Epi-Aid from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) was denied. This critical assistance is needed to help local officials respond to a public health crisis involving a childhood lead poisoning case that was tied to a Milwaukee Public School (MPS) facility. The requested assistance would have supported improved data collection, public awareness outreach, and a comprehensive strategy to help protect public school students from further exposure.<sup>1</sup> It is especially concerning to learn that this denial was reportedly due to a lack of staffing capacity resulting from the recent HHS reduction in force, where over 2,000 CDC employees with critical skills and expertise, including the entire Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention and Surveillance Branch, were fired. We urge you to reinstate childhood lead poisoning experts at CDC and approve the City of Milwaukee's request for assistance to ensure that childhood lead poisoning prevention technical assistance is provided to help ensure that students are protected from lead exposure at school.

According to the CDC, its Epidemiologic Assistance program (Epi-Aid) enables rapid and short-term response by federal public health experts to investigate urgent public health problems, such as infectious and noninfectious disease outbreaks, unexplained illnesses, or natural or manmade disasters. The focus of an Epi-Aid investigation is to assist partners in making rapid, practical decisions for actions to control and prevent the public health problem from growing, thus benefiting both the federal government and those assisted. This assistance is needed in Milwaukee now.

The recently denied Epi-Aid request would support ongoing efforts by the City of Milwaukee and MPS to address a serious public health threat that poses the greatest threat to our youngest residents. But it cannot do so without federal help. As you know, there is no safe level of lead exposure for children. When children are exposed to this neurotoxin, it harms brain development and the nervous system, contributing to learning delays and can lead to severe illness.<sup>2</sup> This toxin endangers our children and prevents them from reaching their full potential. HHS has a responsibility to lend its technical expertise and make available the resources necessary to rid our communities of this poison.

In November, a young MPS student tested positive for lead poisoning, and after careful public health investigation, it was determined that case was connected to deteriorating lead paint chips at Golda Meir Elementary School, a MPS building. Since then, three other children tested positive for lead poisoning, leading to the temporary closure of four MPS Schools<sup>3</sup> while active and ongoing efforts to remediate lead exposures occur in those schools. This issue is likely widespread, as there are 125 MPS buildings built before the federal ban on lead-based paint.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [CDC denies Milwaukee request for help with MPS lead poisoning crisis](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Know the Facts | Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention | CDC](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Positive test for lead poisoning found in student at MPS school](#)

<sup>4</sup> [How MPS failed to monitor lead paint hazards in Milwaukee schools](#)

From news reports, it appears that the decision to shutter the CDC’s Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention and Surveillance Branch contributed to the decision to reject the recent request for EPI-Aid, a request that we understand is usually granted. You recently mentioned that, “there are some programs that were cut that are being reinstated, and I think that’s one of them,” referring to the CDC’s Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention and Surveillance Branch.<sup>5</sup> You also said, “we talked about this from the beginning. We’re going to do 80 percent cuts, but 20 percent of those are going to have to be reinstated because we’ll make mistakes.” This haphazard approach to gutting the federal workforce is misguided and has resulted in unacceptable mistakes at the agency charged with safeguarding the public’s health. You have the ability to immediately rectify this issue, and we urge you to do so.

As Members of Congress, we have worked over the last decade on a bipartisan basis to help secure federal funding to address lead in paint and water infrastructure, including for strong investments that support critical surveillance, environmental investigation, and case management activities to help identify and treat children with elevated blood lead levels in the U.S. In fiscal year 2025, Childhood Lead Poisoning was funded at \$51 million—the same level as fiscal year 2024. HHS has contended that the reduction in force and the efforts to reorganize the department will not affect programs. Unfortunately, the denial of Epi-Aid in this instance is indeed a programmatic consequence of HHS’ abrupt firings that will have lasting consequences for young children in Milwaukee.

Children who are poisoned with lead or at risk for lead poisoning should not bear the burden of a haphazard “restructuring plan.” Federal technical assistance can make a significant impact in our response to this crisis, and the longer local officials are forced to work with strained resources, the longer children and families will suffer. Our communities cannot afford to wait. We urge you to swiftly reconstitute CDC’s Office of Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention and approve the request for EPI-Aid from the City of Milwaukee’s Health Department. Every moment of delay results in harm to our children.

Sincerely,



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Gwen S. Moore  
Member of Congress



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Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator

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<sup>5</sup> [Kennedy says he plans to reinstate some personnel and programs severed in massive HHS layoffs | CNN](#)